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ABSTRACT

The Department of English at Wayne State University is planning to introduce a doctoral program directed to the processes involved in the composition of expository prose. Students admitted to the program will be trained primarily in linguistics and cognitive psychology, though they will also work in communication theory and rhetorical analysis. The program will include three years of course work beyond the B.A. At the end of the third year, course work and preliminary examinations will have been completed, and students will begin a major research project for the dissertation, under the combined direction of a linguist and a psychologist. The new program is seen to be relevant to the total work of the English department and to be of potentially great value to colleagues working in psychological, semiotic, and linguistic criticism. (AA)

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A Research Program in Composition

The Department of English at Wayne State University is planning to introduce into its doctoral curriculum a research program directed to the processes involved in the composition of expository prose. Students accepted into the program will be trained primarily in linguistics and cognitive psychology, though they will also work in communication theory and rhetorical analysis. The concepts and methodologies developed in their training will enable them to explore relatively uncharted territory. In a recent ADE Bulletin, Robert E. Shafer noted that there has been in our time "an explosion in knowledge about human communication, . . . from such seemingly diverse fields as linguistics, symbolic logic, cognitive psychology, information theory, educational theory, and rhetorical theory . . ." In spite of the riches of the new knowledge, most published commentary on writing remains descriptive or prescriptive. It is rarely analytical, rarely based on a solid research foundation and a rigorous methodology. Our goal is to train doctoral students who will be able to assimilate theories and methodologies developed in diverse areas and to concentrate this knowledge and methodological skill on the investigation of the act of composing expository prose.

At this point in the planning of the program, we see three years of course work beyond the B.A. for doctoral students. In the English Department, the students will begin their work with a two-course sequence in which writing will be considered from a linguistic perspective and the general question of the relation between the written and the spoken

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language will be addressed. Over the next two years, linguistics training will continue with three courses in syntax and two in socio-linguistics. Three courses in communication theory will stress semantic constraints on language behavior as well as informational and socio-communicational approaches to writing behavior. Concurrent with their training in linguistics, students will follow an eight-course sequence of work in the Psychology Department. They will study relevant content areas in cognitive psychology, taking courses in Higher Mental Processes, Psychology of Language, Conceptual Behavior, Development of Intelligence, and Verbal Learning. They will also take three courses in statistics and methodology in the Psychology Department. At the end of the second year or the beginning of the third, when they have completed the methodological training, they will undertake a preliminary small-scale research project under the direction of the psychology and linguistics staff of the program. At the end of the third year, course work and preliminary examinations will have been completed, and they will begin a major research project for the dissertation under the combined direction of a linguist and a psychologist.

We are aware that students attracted to such a program will differ significantly from the graduate students who come into the Department to study literature. The applicants to the composition program will have to possess sufficient mathematical abilities to handle advanced work in statistics. To insure the presence of such abilities, we will require of incoming students a reasonable display of competence in the appropriate areas of the Graduate Record Examinations. We will also be looking for minimal undergraduate background in psychology and linguistics, though we will accept promising students who are willing to acquire this back-

ground. We feel that the presence in the department of students with such a notably different perspective will be stimulating to students and staff in our regular program. We are expecting that students in the writing program will take courses in literature in their three year training, and that students in the literature program will take appropriate modules of work in linguistics and psychology. We are hoping that the meeting in formal and informal discussion of these widely different qualities of mind and methodological background will generate considerable intellectual excitement in all areas of our Ph.D. curriculum.

As those of us who teach composition know, a firm theoretical foundation on which the teaching of writing should be based does not yet exist. Our program, with its combined emphases will, we hope, generate research which should be a significant contribution toward the formulation of such theory. Professor Michael Bell, a folklorist and communication-theorist, and Professor Alan Perlman, a socio-linguist, both members of the English Department, are currently engaged in the first major research project associated with the writing program. Using a corpus of student papers, they are attempting to discover what they call a grammar of vernacular writing. They have undertaken a systematic exploration of the organizational principles which render these papers logical, coherent, and meaningful to their producers. It is their working assumption that this analysis will demonstrate that the deviations from the norms of standard English in the compositions represent in fact the application by students of systematic rules to the production of written language. Professors Bell and Perlman suspect that what we see in certain kinds of student writing represents a pidginization process, that is students in the act of writing are bringing together two different language systems to create

a pidgin language with its own structural rules and transformations. If they are able to demonstrate that a grammar is in fact functioning in the production of these papers, they and the psychologists who are working in the program hope to design appropriate testing situations in order to explore ethnographic and psychological contexts in which such writing exists and is experienced by students and the community in general.

We do not see the program in writing as a rejection of the work traditionally performed by English departments. Rather the program testifies to our serious commitment to the critical skills associated with the study of literature. English departments have always rigorously considered literary texts. What we wish to do is expand the body of data which constitutes the legitimate research area for scholars and students in the Department. Our staff is composed of folklorists and linguists, in addition to those who are trained in various literary critical methodologies. The diversity of training and interests within our department is beneficial to those of us who are working in literary criticism. We see the new program as relevant to the total work of the department and of potentially great value to colleagues working in psychological, semiotic, and linguistic criticism. If the work of English departments is to mean anything, it must combine a commitment to past values and an ability to assimilate to them new forms of critical analysis.